

Chapter 5

Ecclesiastical History

(c. 300)

Eusebius of Caesarea

Introduction

Eusebius (ca. 260-339 or 340), bishop of the church of Caesarea in Palestine, was a prolific writer. His single most enduring work is his *Ecclesiastical History*, which traces the fortunes of the Christian Church from its earliest days to the early fourth century. This history has rightly earned Eusebius the title Father of Church history, inasmuch as it is the most complete and coherent account that we possess of the Church's first three centuries.

More than simply a scholar, Eusebius was active in the affairs of the early fourth-century Church and suffered in the process. He had been imprisoned during the era of the Great Persecution (303-311) and had seen many of his friends tortured and martyred. But he also lived to see the miracle of the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity after the emperor's victory in 312. Following his elevation to the bishopric of Caesarea around 313, Eusebius came to enjoy the Christian emperor's patronage and friendship.

The excerpts below come from Book 5, an appendix to Book 8 entitled "The Martyrs of Palestine", and Book 10. Note the significant differences in tone and message between the first two excerpts and the third, which deals with Constantine's victory in 324 over Licinius, his former co-emperor.

Questions to Consider

- What lessons did Eusebius intend his reader to draw from his history? What significance did he attach to the suffering of early Christians?
- According to Eusebius, under what circumstances could Church and State co-exist in harmony? What does this say about the political goals of Eusebius and his fellow Christians?

Other writers of history record the victories of war and trophies won from enemies, the skill of generals, and the manly bravery of soldiers, defiled with blood and with innumerable slaughters for the sake of children and country and other possessions. But our narrative of the government of God will record in ineffaceable letters the most peaceful wars waged in behalf of the peace of the soul, and will tell of men doing brave deeds for truth rather than country, and for piety rather than dearest friends. It will hand down to imperishable remembrance the discipline and the much-tried fortitude of the athletes of religion, the trophies won from demons, the victories over invisible enemies, and the crowns placed upon their heads.

Up to the sixth year the storm had been incessantly raging against us. Before this time there had been a very large number of confessors of religion in the so-called Porphyry quarry in Thebais,

1 which gets its name from the stone found there. Of these, one hundred men, lacking three,
2 together with women and infants, were sent to the governor of Palestine. When they confessed
3 the God of the universe and Christ, Firmilianus, who had been sent there as a governor in the
4 place of Urbanus, directed, in accordance with the imperial command, that they should be
5 maimed by burning the sinews of the ankles of their left feet, and that their right eyes with the
6 eyelids and pupils should first be cut out, and then destroyed by hot irons to the very roots. And
7 he then sent them to the mines in the province to endure hardships with severe toil and suffering.

8
9 But it was not sufficient that these only who suffered such miseries should be deprived of their
10 eyes, but those natives of Palestine also, who were mentioned just above as condemned to
11 pugilistic combat, since they would neither receive food from the royal storehouse nor undergo
12 the necessary preparatory exercises. Having been brought on this account not only before the
13 overseers, but also before Maximinus himself, and having manifested the noblest persistence in
14 confession by the endurance of hunger and stripes, they received like punishment with those
15 whom we have mentioned, and with them other confessors in the city of Caesarea. Immediately
16 afterwards others who were gathered to hear the Scriptures read, were seized in Gaza, and some
17 endured the same sufferings in the feet and eyes; but others were afflicted with yet greater
18 torments and with most terrible tortures in the sides. One of these, in body a woman, but in
19 understanding a man, would not endure the threat of rape, and spoke directly against the tyrant
20 who entrusted the government to such cruel judges. She was first scourged and then raised aloft
21 on the stake, and her sides lacerated. As those appointed for this purpose applied the tortures
22 incessantly and severely at the command of the judge, another, with mind fixed, like the former,
23 on virginity as her aim, -- a woman who was altogether mean in form and contemptible in
24 appearance, but, on the other hand, strong in soul, and endowed with an understanding superior
25 to her body, -- being unable to bear the merciless and cruel and inhuman deeds, with a boldness
26 beyond that of the combatants famed among the Greeks, cried out to the judge from the midst of
27 the crowd: "And how long will you thus cruelly torture my sister?" But he was greatly enraged
28 and ordered the woman to be immediately seized. Thereupon she was brought forward and
29 having called herself by the august name of the Savior, she was first urged by words to sacrifice,
30 and as she refused she was dragged by force to the altar. But her sister continued to maintain her
31 former zeal, and with intrepid and resolute foot kicked the altar, and overturned it with the fire
32 that was on it. Thereupon the judge, enraged like a wild beast, inflicted on her such tortures in
33 her sides as he never had on any one before, striving almost to glut himself with her raw flesh.
34 But when his madness was satiated, he bound them both together, this one and her whom she
35 called sister, and condemned them to death by fire. It is said that the first of these was from the
36 country of Gaza; the other, by name Valentina, was of Caesarea, and was well known to many.

37
38 Thanks for all things be given unto God the Omnipotent Ruler and King of the universe, and the
39 greatest thanks to Jesus Christ the Savior and Redeemer of our souls, through whom we pray that
40 peace may be always preserved for us firm and undisturbed by external troubles and troubles of
41 the mind. Since in accordance with your wishes, my most holy Paulinus, we have added the tenth
42 book of the Church History to those which have preceded, we will inscribe it to you, proclaiming
43 you as the seal of the whole work; and we will fitly add in a perfect number the perfect panegyric
44 upon the restoration of the churches, obeying the Divine Spirit which exhorts us in the following
45 words: "Sing unto the Lord a new song, for he hath done marvelous things. His right hand and
46 his holy arm hath saved him. The Lord hath made known his salvation, his righteousness hath he

1 revealed in the presence of the nations." And in accordance with the utterance which commands
2 us to sing the new song, let us proceed to show that, after those terrible and gloomy spectacles
3 which we have described, we are now permitted to see and celebrate such things as many truly
4 righteous men and martyrs of God before us desired to see upon earth and did not see, and to
5 hear and did not hear. But they, hastening on, obtained far better things, being carried to Heaven
6 and the paradise of divine pleasure. But, acknowledging that even these things are greater than
7 we deserve, we have been astonished at the grace manifested by the author of the great gifts, and
8 rightly do we admire him, worshiping him with the whole power of our souls, and testifying to
9 the truth of those recorded utterances, in which it is said, "Come and see the works of the Lord,
10 the wonders which he hath done upon the earth; he removeth wars to the ends of the world, he
11 shall break the bow and snap the spear in sunder, and shall burn the shields with fire." Rejoicing
12 in these things which have been clearly fulfilled in our day, let us proceed with our account.

13
14 The whole race of God's enemies was destroyed in the manner indicated, and was thus suddenly
15 swept from the sight of men. So that again a divine utterance had its fulfillment: "I have seen the
16 impious highly exalted and raising himself like the cedars of Lebanon; and I have passed by, and
17 behold, he was not; and I have sought his place, and it could not be found." And finally a bright
18 and splendid day, overshadowed by no cloud, illuminated with beams of heavenly light the
19 churches of Christ throughout the entire world. And not even those outside our communion were
20 prevented from sharing in the same blessings, or at least from coming under their influence and
21 enjoying a part of the benefits bestowed upon us by God.

22
23 All men, then, were freed from the oppression of the tyrants, and being released from the former
24 ills, one in one way and another in another acknowledged the defender of the pious to be the only
25 true God. And we especially who placed our hopes in the Christ of God had unspeakable
26 gladness, and a certain inspired joy bloomed for all of us, when we saw every place which
27 shortly before had been desolated by the impieties of the tyrants reviving as if from a long and
28 death-fraught pestilence, and temples again rising from their foundations to an immense height,
29 and receiving a splendor far greater than that of the old ones which had been destroyed. But the
30 supreme rulers also confirmed to us still more extensively the munificence of God by repeated
31 ordinances in behalf of the Christians; and personal letters of the emperor were sent to the
32 bishops, with honors and gifts of money. It may not be unfitting to insert these documents,
33 translated from the Roman into the Greek tongue, at the proper place in this book, as in a sacred
34 tablet, that they may remain as a memorial to all who shall come after us....

35
36 To him, therefore, God granted, from Heaven above, the deserved fruit of piety, the trophies of
37 victory over the impious, and he cast the guilty one with all his counselors and friends prostrate
38 at the feet of Constantine. For when Licinius carried his madness to the last extreme, the
39 emperor, the friend of God, thinking that he ought no longer to be tolerated, acting upon the basis
40 of sound judgement, and mingling the firm principles of justice with humanity, gladly
41 determined to come to the protection of those who were oppressed by the tyrant, and undertook,
42 by putting a few destroyers out of the way, to save the greater part of the human race. For when
43 he had formerly exercised humanity alone and had shown mercy to him who was not worthy of
44 sympathy, nothing was accomplished; for Licinius did not renounce his wickedness, but rather
45 increased his fury against the people that were subject to him, and there was left to the afflicted
46 no hope of salvation, oppressed as they were by a savage beast. Wherefore, the protector of the

1 virtuous, mingling hatred for evil with love for good, went forth with his son Crispus, a most
2 beneficent prince, and extended a saving right hand to all that were perishing. Both of them,
3 father and son, under the protection, as it were, of God, the universal King, with the Son of God,
4 the Savior of all, as their leader and ally, drew up their forces on all sides against the enemies of
5 the Deity and won an easy victory; God having prospered them in the battle in all respects
6 according to their wish. Thus, suddenly, and sooner than can be told, those who yesterday and
7 the day before breathed death and threatening were no more, and not even their names were
8 remembered, but their inscriptions and their honors suffered the merited disgrace. And the things
9 which Licinius with his own eyes had seen come upon the former impious tyrants he himself
10 likewise suffered, because he did not receive instruction nor learn wisdom from the
11 chastisements of his neighbors, but followed the same path of impiety which they had trod, and
12 was justly hurled over the same precipice. Thus he lay prostrate.

13
14 But Constantine, the mightiest victor, adorned with every virtue of piety, together with his son
15 Crispus, a most God-beloved prince, and in all respects like his father, recovered the East which
16 belonged to them; and they formed one united Roman empire as of old, bringing under their
17 peaceful sway the whole world from the rising of the sun to the opposite quarter, both north and
18 south, even to the extremities of the declining day. All fear therefore of those who had formerly
19 afflicted them was taken away from men, and they celebrated splendid and festive days.
20 Everything was filled with light, and those who before were downcast beheld each other with
21 smiling faces and beaming eyes. With dances and hymns, in city and country, they glorified first
22 of all God the universal King, because they had been thus taught, and then the pious emperor
23 with his God-beloved children. There was oblivion of past evils and forgetfulness of every deed
24 of impiety; there was enjoyment of present benefits and expectation of those yet to come. Edicts
25 full of clemency and laws containing tokens of benevolence and true piety were issued in every
26 place by the victorious emperor. Thus after all tyranny had been purged away, the empire which
27 belonged to them was preserved firm and without a rival for Constantine and his sons alone. And
28 having obliterated the godlessness of their predecessors, recognizing the benefits conferred upon
29 them by God, they exhibited their love of virtue and their love of God, and their piety and
30 gratitude to the Deity, by the deed which they performed in the sight of all men.